



Explaining Cambodia's and Vietnam's China Policies

National Security and Regime Survival?

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Abstract

This paper aims at explaining how Cambodia and Vietnam responds to the rise of China by looking at national security and regime survival dimension. While Cambodia opts to pursue “soft bandwagoning” policy, Vietnam in contrast chooses to go with “hedging” strategy. As for Cambodia, this strategy has enabled the country to gain much of the Chinese support to fight against its former aggressor – Vietnam – in case it chooses to pursue its future invasion and to serve as a backup while confronting pressures from the international community in regard to its record of human rights abuses and declining democracy. As for Vietnam, the country pursues an intelligent hedging policy because China is able to provide support that Vietnam needs to guarantee its regime survival while facing the on-going external pressures on its human rights violations and communist rule. However, Vietnam views China and its expansionist policy at the South China Sea as a credible threat to its sovereign territory.

Introduction

The rapid rise of China has attracted tremendous debate about the short-term and long-term intentions of its capability. John Mearsheimer, Political Science professor at the University of Chicago, is arguably one of the most vocal scholars to argue that the rise of China is not going to be peaceful.¹

As he points out, China will likely turn its economic might into military capability and dominate Asia, that is, what he terms “offensive capability”. On the flip side of the argument, Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University in Beijing reiterates that the rise of China is and will be peaceful; and would bring about common economic prosperity

¹ Mearsheimer, John J. *Can China Rise Peacefully?* October 25, 2014. <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204> (accessed March 10, 2018).

for the region and the world.² China has been viewed by the US, as a newly assertive superpower given its ambitious actions in the South China Sea.³ Its assertive behaviors have posed grave concerns to the countries in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Such growing concerns among some ASEAN member states have been ameliorated through China's tactical confidence-building measures.⁴ As Michael Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel explain, China has chosen to pursue bilateral negotiations with the countries with which it has territorial disputes in order to avoid conflict.⁵ Among other recent developments, the Philippines, under Rodrigo Duterte, has radically shifted its foreign policy direction in favor of China by pursuing an accommodation policy. However, for small states⁶ like Cambodia and Vietnam, their approach to China is a critical question, requiring viable foreign policy options to make sure that their survival can be assured in the context of a rising China and a greater power rivalry.

Cambodia has been seen as a client state of China.⁷ This is, in part, due to the fact that it blocked the 2012 ASEAN joint communiqué that intended to criticize China on its assertive behavior in the South China Sea.⁸ In the meantime, Vietnam is one of the claimant states over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, warning that it has to meticulously map out its foreign policy strategy to deal with China. The aim of this paper is to conduct a comparative study which investigates the discrepancies and similarities between Cambodian and Vietnamese foreign policy towards China (within national security and regime survival dimensions) and elucidate why these two Southeast Asian countries pursue such policies.

Defining Key Terms: Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Hedging

Traditionally, small states do not enjoy much room for maneuvering. Their conventional foreign policy strategies include “balancing” and “bandwagoning”.⁹

² Xuetong, Yan. "The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes." *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (2001): 33-39.

³ Johnston, Alastair Iain. "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 7-48.

⁴ Townshend, Ashley, and Rory Medcalf. *Shifting Waters: China's New Passive Assertiveness in Asian Maritime Security*. 2016. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/shifting-waters-china-s-new-passive-assertiveness-asian-maritime-security> (accessed March 10, 2018).

⁵ Michael, Swaine and Fravel, Taylor. "China's Assertive Behavior: Part II: The Maritime Periphery". *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 35 (2011): 1-29.

⁶ For the discussion of the meaning of the term “small state”, please refer to Leng, Thearith. "Small state diplomacy: Cambodia's foreign policy towards Vietnam." *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 3 (2016): 328-347.

⁷ The term “client state”, as described by John Ciorciari, refers to the conditions under which “the weaker partner typically repay aid and protection by supporting the stronger power's diplomatic agenda, economic interests, and often its projection of military might”. For further detail analysis, please refer to Ciorciari, John D. "A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (May 2015): 245-278.

⁸ Ciorciari, John D. "A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (May 2015): 245-278.

⁹ Schweller, Randall L. "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In." *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72-107.

However, hitherto, another novel approach – hedging – exists and gains much attention from International Relations scholars. Likewise, it is vitally important to define these concepts in order to have a sense of what it is and why small states decide to choose one over another.

From the realist perspective, the term “balance” or “balancing” refers to an act of allying with others against the prevailing threat and/or of building up internal military capabilities as a deterrent, in which the concept can be categorized into “internal balancing” and “external balancing”.¹⁰ The former means that a small state may choose to bolster its defense capability by raising defense expenditure and strengthening military weaponry to counterweight a threat. Meanwhile, the latter means that a small state may ally with another state, which shares a perceived common threat, in order to counter the rival state.¹¹ This implies that the internal balancing is costly for small states and pursuing the external balancing by joining other states to form security alliances or partnership to countercheck the imagined threat may be another option. As Stephen M. Walt contends, these small states come

to the conclusion that their survival is at risk if the potential hegemon becomes too strong.¹² However, the unpredictability of the future balance of power compels states not to rely on one form over another, but rather to combine these approaches to avoid future catastrophe.

Unlike balancing, “bandwagoning” denotes that the small state “gives in” the rival power in order to avoid being conquered¹³ or opts to align itself with the victor to earn economic benefits.¹⁴ Robert Ross contends that relative state power is the determinant factor of how states engage with one another, implying that the more powerful states, either economically or militarily, in the international system will dominate the weaker ones.¹⁵ In this sense, smaller states in the Southeast Asia region can mitigate the threat of the larger, more powerful states by balancing against or bandwagoning with them.¹⁶ But there are divergent interpretations about bandwagoning logic. For Walt, even though jumping on the most powerful hegemon’s bandwagoning costs small states an uneven exchange, it has to do so to eschew attack and protect its national security.¹⁷ Unlike Walt, Randall L. Schweller argues that the

¹⁰ Walt, Stephen M. *Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

¹¹ Ibid.,

¹² Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ Schweller, Randall L. “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In.” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72-107.

¹⁵ Ross, Robert S. “The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century.” *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): 81-118.

¹⁶ Chen, Ian Tsung-Yen, and Alan Hao Yang. “A harmonized Southeast Asia? Explanatory typologies of ASEAN countries’ strategies to the rise of China.” *The Pacific Review* 26, no. 3 (2013): 265-288.

¹⁷ Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*.

goal of bandwagoning is simply motivated by the potential economic gains such as trade and investment as an exchange for its political and security compliance to the hegemon.¹⁸

As for “hedging”, the term can be referred to “a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality but rather cultivating a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another”.¹⁹ For Cheng-Chwee Kuik, hedging can be understood as “a behaviour in which an actor tries to mitigate risks by pursuing multiple policy options, which would produce mutually counteracting effects, under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes”.²⁰ He further illustrates that hedging enables small states to “keep open more than one strategic option against the possibility of a future security threat”.²¹ Even though the concept of hedging sounds logical for small states to pursue, some still opt to go with bandwagoning, like the case of Cambodia. The following section will elucidate this difference.

Brief Overview of Sino-Cambodian Relations

The relationship between these two countries can be dated back eight centuries ago when the Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan paid an official visit to Cambodia in 1296, initiating bilateral cultural and commercial contact.²² However, the relationship between Cambodia and China has not always been romantic, as seen recently, but rather waxed and waned. In 1956, Prince Sihanouk paid his first visit to China and was warmly welcomed by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. Prince Sihanouk during his visit was granted a “free and unconditional” gift for the amount of US\$ 22.4 million, which was the first ever Chinese grant to a non-Communist country.²³ But between April 1975 and January 1979, China was the main external partner to the cruel “Democratic Kampuchea” government, which was responsible for the killing of 1.7 million people under its leadership. Even after the collapse of the regime, China still continued to support Pol Pot with weaponry along the Thai-Cambodian border between 1979 and 1990.²⁴

Cambodia's internal conflict ended with the first general election in 1993 that resulted in forming a coalition government,

¹⁸ Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In.”

¹⁹ Goh, Evelyn. “Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies.” *Policy Studies* (East-West Center Washington) 16 (2005).

²⁰ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 3 (2008): 159-185.

²¹ Ibid., 166.

²² Daguan, Zhou. “A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People.” Chiang Mai. Silkworm Books, 2007.

²³ CIA. *Prince Sihanouk and the New Order in Southeast Asia*. May 2007. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/esau-25.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2018).

²⁴ Pheakdey, Heng. “Cambodia-China Relations: A Positive Sum Game?” *Journal of Current Southeast Asia Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2012): 57-85

consisting of the FUNCINPEC party led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the son of King Sihanouk and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), led by Hun Sen, a former prime minister in the Vietnamese-installed People's Republic of Kampuchea during the 1980s. Because of the Chinese suspicion that the prince might have close contact with Taiwan, China withdrew all its support from him. Afterwards, in 1997, Hun Sen staged a bloody coup to oust Prince Norodom Ranariddh to tighten his grip on power. The international community responded to the coup by issuing a condemnation letter and cutting its aid programs to the kingdom. Desperate for international support, Hun Sen turned to play the China card by promptly expelling Taiwan's unofficial liaison office in Phnom Penh. The Chinese government was very pleased and, accordingly, applauded this decision. Since then, both countries have started to move closer to each other in terms of political, economic, security, and cultural dimensions. In addition, as Cambodia tilts even closer to China, the country as one of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members blocked the issuance of the 2012 ASEAN Joint Communiqué and the words referent to the South China Sea in the 2016 ASEAN Joint Communiqué. The following section will answer the question why Cambodia chooses to bandwagon with China.

Cambodia's Foreign Policy Towards China

This paper adopts the term “soft bandwagoning” put forward by Leng Thearith to delineate Cambodia's China policy.²⁵ There are several driving motives behind this strategy. First, Cambodia's relations with Vietnam are critical in determining the country's foreign policy towards China. Cambodia needs China as a hedging tool against Vietnam. Moving closer to China grants Cambodia strong support that can magnify its confidence to stand against the aggressor and maintain its national security. During the 1800s, Cambodia was conquered and divided by Siam, known as today Thailand, and Vietnam. The country was later united with French help. Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia at the end of 1978, justifying its actions with the excuse of liberating the country from the Khmer Rouge regime and its infamous genocide. Subsequently, because of the friendship between China and Cambodia under Pol Pot leadership, China invaded Vietnam in 1979 as a response to its invasion of Cambodia.

Even at the present time, Vietnam has been trying to encroach on Cambodia. One of the examples can be found in 2015 when a group of Vietnamese, without any legitimate authority, dug five ponds at the northeastern province of the Cambodian territory. If China remains an engaged regional actor, it would play a significant

²⁵ Leng, Thearith. "A New Small State's Foreign Policy Approach towards a Great Power: The Case of Cambodia's Foreign Policy towards China." *Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies* 02 (May 2016).

role in preserving Cambodia's sovereign territory as Cambodia needs China to hedge against Vietnam.²⁶ Furthermore, to modernize its defense capability, Cambodia has strengthened military ties with Beijing. This is evident in the recent joint military exercise, known as "the Golden Dragon", along with the Chinese military assistance. The prominent Cambodian scholar Chheang Vannarith notes, "The continued provision of Chinese military support is likely to make Cambodia's army feel more secure in its dealings with its much more powerful neighbors Thailand and Vietnam."²⁷ As long as Vietnam is perceived to be hostile, Cambodia is not likely to abandon its bandwagoning policy towards China.

Second, while Cambodia is an authoritarian country, in which Hun Sen has ruled for over 30 years,²⁸ Hun Sen needs China as a source of economic and diplomatic support in times of crisis. The forms of the crises may include the reduction of foreign aid from the West, the increasing tariffs on Cambodian exports, or any domestic unrest derived from the dissatisfaction of the people. When

pressured by international bodies on allegations of human rights abuses, oppression, corruption, and misuse of power at high government levels, Cambodia can always turn to China as the giant dragon has no hesitation in stepping up and reciprocally supporting its "little brother".²⁹ This is because, as Veasna Var observes, the aid from the West and the United States carries with it strict conditions on human rights, good governance, and democracy. Conversely, the Chinese aid policy has "no-strings attached", meaning that China does not require any documented proof for the use of funds and does not interfere in Cambodia's internal affairs.³⁰ Another renowned scholar on Southeast Asian affairs, Carl Thayer also observes that "Cambodia's decision to bandwagon with China is aimed at insulating itself from Western pressures to maintain a liberal, multiparty democracy and to respect human rights. Cambodia knows that if it hews to China's line, there will be little or no interference in its domestic political affairs."³¹

²⁶ Leng, Thearith. "Small state diplomacy: Cambodia's foreign policy towards Vietnam." *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 3 (2016): 328-347.

²⁷ Chengpor, Aun. Cambodia Joins China for Military Drills as US Relations Cool. VOA. March 18, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-china-joint-military-drills-us-relations-cool/4302875.html> (accessed March 20, 2018).

²⁸ Un, Kheang. "Cambodia: Moving away from democracy? ." *International Political Science Review* 35, no. 5 (2011): 546-562.

²⁹ Burgos, Sigfrido, and Sophal Ear. "China's Strategic Interests in Cambodia: Influence and Resources." *Asian Survey* 50, no. 3 (2010): 615-639.

³⁰ Var, Veasna. Holding Balance Between Two Superpowers: Cambodia's Strategic Choices For Foreign And Development Policy. Eurasia Review. July 27, 2016. <http://www.eurasiareview.com/27072016-holding-balance-between-two-superpowers-cambodias-strategic-choices-for-foreign-and-development-policy-analysis/>(accessed March 15, 2018).

³¹ Chengpor, Aun. Cambodia Joins China for Military Drills as US Relations Cool. VOA. March 18, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-china-joint-military-drills-us-relations-cool/4302875.html> (accessed March 20, 2018).

The effective implementation of the rule of law and allowing the people to vote in free and fair elections can pose a threat to Hun Sen's regime. The 2016 general elections have proved that the level of the people's discontent is rising, seeing declining popularity of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) but growing threshold of confidence in the opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). Because of the trepidation of losing power, many analysts have observed that the ruling party has to dissolve its opponent and jail the president of the CNRP by using the judiciary power of the court. Once again, while the international community strongly condemns such moves taken by the ruling party, China seems to be pleased to announce that it supports and will continue to support Cambodian struggles to maintain peace and stability and pursue its own path of economic development. This clear commitment from Beijing encourages Cambodia to believe that its leaders could rest assured and continue ruling Cambodia, while China is and will always remain available in case the Cambodian government requires assistance.

However, given the fact that Cambodia seems to be so close to China, Cambodia is reluctant to enter into the subordinate client state of the giant dragon. At the same time, the country is seeking to diversify and to cement its relations with other major powers.³² After the elevation of Cambodia's relations with Beijing to the

status of a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in December 2010 – the highest level of cooperation Phnom Penh has ever reached with a foreign government – Cambodia also upgraded its relations with Tokyo to a "Strategic Partnership" in December 2013. As for the United States, Cambodia has become one of the Southeast Asia countries that strongly back the US policy of fighting against the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. Cambodia has committed to cooperating with the US in searching for soldiers gone missing during the Second Indochinese war from the 1960s to the 1970s. Cambodia also supported the elevation of the US-ASEAN partnership to a "Strategic Level" in November 2015 – a move not warmly received in Beijing. However, the relationship with the U.S. has deteriorated since 2017 because of the government's crackdown on the opposition party, civil society, and free press. As Sophal Sek observes, this is not because of Cambodia's close relation with China, but rather the shift in America's Asia strategy under Donald Trump.³³ In relation to Vietnam, Cambodia is striving to maintain the benign friendship with Vietnam to resolve the mistrust between the two countries through several state visits and bilateral trade and investment agreements.

Cambodia moves closer to China in order to gain its security protection from external threats and to obtain Chinese unconditional aid without having to address

³² Ciorciari, John D. "A Chinese model for patron–client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership."

³³ Sophal, Sek. *US-Cambodia Standoff*. Bangkok Post. April 2, 2018. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1439187/us-cambodia-standoff>. (accessed April 3, 2018).

criticism of its human rights abuses and limited quality of democracy. Despite this, Cambodia also diversifies and upgrades its relations with China's current strategic rivals, namely Japan, the United States, and Vietnam. Cambodia's mistrust of Vietnam is rooted in the two countries' history of conflict. Nonetheless, Cambodia's leaders still believe that the country will progress faster economically as long as the country maintains friendly relations with its neighbors, including Vietnam.

Brief Overview of Sino-Vietnamese Relations

Unlike Sino-Cambodian relations, Sino-Vietnamese ties have more often been unfriendly than friendly. During the Second Indochina War, China was Vietnam's closest ally. China helped build Vietnam's economy while it struggled against the United States. Regardless, Vietnam has still viewed China as a serious challenge to its national security since the end of the Second Indochina War between late 1950s and mid-1975. This was subsequently followed by a 29-day Chinese intrusion into Vietnam in February 1979, after Vietnam invaded Cambodia. The broken relationship between the countries could be seen through the escalation of that 1979 conflict and its continuing diplomatic repercussions. Other factors include the maltreatment of the Hoa (Han Chinese in

Vietnam) community, the dispute over territorial waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, the construction of artificial islands, clashes in the South China Sea, and Vietnam's pivot to Russia.³⁴

In addition, China pursued a protracted policy of bleeding Vietnam white, keeping the northern border area tense, and offering arms and other assistance to anti-Vietnamese resistance forces, the Khmer Rouge in particular.³⁵ The purpose of this policy was to make Vietnam's Cambodia venture so costly that it would be forced to withdraw its troops, to end its special relationship with the government in Phnom Penh, and to give due recognition to China's regional preeminence.³⁶ During this period, the efforts for relationship normalization with Vietnam had been brought to the center due to the fact that border security and stability were vital to facilitate China's economic growth.³⁷

The changing global milieu after the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union offered opportunities for establishing diplomatic ties between China and Vietnam in 1991, marking the outset of a new era in Sino-Vietnamese relations after a decade of estrangement. Even after normalization in relations between the countries, a number of maritime and territorial issues were left unresolved and would later come to awaken Hanoi's historical distrust of Beijing.

³⁴ Chakraborti, Tridib. "China and Vietnam in the South China Sea Dispute: A Creeping 'Conflict–Peace–Trepidation' Syndrome ." *China Report* 48, no. 3 (2012): 283-301.

³⁵ Thayer, Carl A. "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest." *Asian Survey* 34, no. 6 (1994): 513-528.

³⁶ Ibid.,

³⁷ Storey, Ian. *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China: The search for security*. 1st Edition. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.

Vietnam's Foreign Policy Towards China

Given the historical experience with and the current economic rise and military buildup of China, Vietnam opts to pursue the hedging strategy against the giant dragon living next door after the normalization of the relationship.³⁸ First and foremost, Vietnam's China policy is shaped by the South China Sea feud, later internationalized by the great power rivalry between China and the United States in Asia.³⁹ Because of geographic proximity to China and its asymmetrical power, Vietnam has experienced numerous hurdles. It cannot antagonize China by publicly condemning its assertive and aggressive actions in the South China Sea. This trepidation can be epitomized by the Chinese invasion of its territory in 1979. In the meantime, it cannot pursue explicit security ties by jumping on Beijing's bandwagoning because this would be a sign of its subordination in a way that its perceived sovereignty over the South China Sea islands may be at risk. This is what some analysts call "the tyranny of geography".⁴⁰

To break out this dilemma, Vietnam has mapped out a "struggle and cooperation" policy with China in regard to fundamentally conflicted and cooperative areas, creating a "mature asymmetry" in the

bilateral relations.⁴¹ According to Carl Thayer, "Mature asymmetry exists when the weaker state gives deference to the more powerful state in return for the stronger state's recognition of the weaker state's autonomy".⁴² Moreover, the Vietnamese struggle against Chinese threats in the South China Sea has coincided with the great power rivalry for influence in Asia. Such rivalry can be seen through the United States pivot or rebalance to Asia under Obama, Japan's recent efforts to augment its political role in Asia under the Abe administration, and the Indian Act East policy under Modi, intensifying the strategic competition for sphere of influence. The United States under Donald Trump has announced a new strategic concept – the Indo-Pacific region – that tends to invite India to play an increasing role in the international affairs and Vietnam, no doubt, could stand to benefit from this new initiative. In the uncertain circumstances, Vietnamese national security interest can be best served through its diversification of relations with all stakeholders in the region.

In relation to the United States, the military-to-military ties have become friendlier since 1997.⁴³ In addition, Vietnam has called for an informal establishment of a naval coalition led by the United States with

³⁸ Hiep, Le Hong. "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy against China since Normalization." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 35, no. 3 (2013): 333-368.

³⁹ Do, Thuy T. "'Firm in principles, flexible in strategy and tactics': Understanding the logic of Vietnam's China policy." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 2, no. 1 (2016): 24-39.

⁴⁰ Thayer, Carlyle A. "The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 348-369.

⁴¹ Ibid., 348.

⁴² Ibid., 348.

⁴³ Hayton, Bill. "Vietnam and the United States: An Emerging Security Partnership." The United States Studies Centre, the University of Sydney, New South Wales, 2016.

the hope that it will contain China's expansion in the South China Sea as Vietnam has viewed Chinese expansion as a threat to its national security. Vietnam has forged its military relations with Japan by allowing Japan Self-Defense Forces to station at Cam Ranh Bay which could signal a Japanese commitment to Vietnam in the South China Sea and herald a new chapter in bilateral defense cooperation with the purpose to keep the China's surge in check. As for India, the two countries have lifted their relationship status to "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". During his 2016 visit to Vietnam, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a new Defense Line of Credit for Vietnam of US\$ 500 million, aimed at facilitating deeper defense cooperation.⁴⁴ This combined assistance gives Vietnam more confidence in dealing with China at the South China Sea.

As seen in Vietnam's efforts to build stronger military relations with the United States, Japan, and India, three countries which are not militarily friendly towards China, Vietnam's China policy is hedging against China rather than balancing. The Vietnamese Prime Minister's recent 2016 visit to China has brought about nine documents to be signed, including the five-year development economic cooperation

plan 2017-2021, an agreement on non-refundable aid between Vietnam and China, a US\$ 250 million loan for the Cat Linh-Ha Dong metro line and other agreements on education cooperation and climate change mitigation.⁴⁵ The visit was also aimed at managing maritime differences and maintaining peace and stability amid simmering tensions in the South China Sea.

In contrast, Vietnam has sought to maintain good relations with China. This is because China has long served as Vietnam's ideological model that could contribute to the long-lasting survival of its communist regime. While Vietnam views China as an external security threat, Vietnam also views the American advocacy to promote human rights and democracy as a threat to its regime.⁴⁶ The act of promoting such values encourages the Vietnamese people to better understand or reevaluate their rights as citizens, potentially prompting them to demand more from their government in terms of economic and political freedoms.

In this sense, securing friendly ties with China is a top priority for the Vietnamese government to make sure that the survival of their communist regime is sustained and avoids the same fate of other communist parties in Eastern Europe.⁴⁷ Professor Carl Thayer categorizes the Sino-

⁴⁴ FirstPost. *India signs 12 agreements with Vietnam, extends \$500m for defence cooperation*. September 3, 2016. <https://www.firstpost.com/world/india-signs-12-agreements-with-vietnam-extends-500m-for-defence-cooperation-2989334.html> (accessed March 17, 2018).

⁴⁵ VTV. *Vietnamese Prime Minister visits China*. September 13, 2016. <http://english.vtv.vn/news/vietnamese-prime-minister-visits-china-20160929172118524.htm> (accessed March 18, 2018).

⁴⁶ Liu, Ruonan, and Xuefeng Sun. "Regime security first: explaining Vietnam's security policies towards the United States and China (1992–2012)." *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 5 (2015): 755–778.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 756–760.

Vietnamese ideological relationship as “close as lips and teeth”.⁴⁸ He further notes that even though the growing tension at the South China Sea still exists, the Vietnamese leaders have regularly conducted both formal and informal state visits to Beijing in order to exchange views on party-building and economic development.⁴⁹ Such act encapsulates Vietnamese top political elites’ significant recognition towards China as an ideological big brother. It seems that Vietnam’s approaches China is often fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, it does not feel that China can be trusted when it comes to the issue of national security because of the South China Sea dispute. On the other hand, it has to forge good relations with Beijing in order to secure its communist regime since China has a lot to offer in terms of developing economy with the communist ideology.

Conclusion

Cambodia approaches China with the soft bandwagoning policy. With this strategy, Cambodia stands to gain much of Chinese support to fight against its former aggressor – Vietnam – in case it chooses to pursue future invasions. Meanwhile, the authoritarian leader of Cambodia needs China to serve as a source of support while confronting pressures of the international community that stem from its record of human rights abuses and declining demo-

cracy. For Vietnam, the country pursues an intelligent multi-faceted hedging policy. This is because China can provide the support that Vietnam needs to guarantee the survival of its regime in the face of ongoing external pressure on its human rights abuses and communist rule. However, Vietnam views China and its expansionist policy at the South China Sea as a real threat to its sovereign territory. In order to navigate the situation created by these two security concerns, Vietnam has sought to make more friends, who have viewed China as their strategic competitors, to gain both economic and military support that could serve as a hedging tool against the rising dragon.

Cambodia’s decisions to hedge against Vietnam by soliciting help from China appears to be strategically promising. In the meantime, China has always been willing to accommodate Cambodia’s request. Nevertheless, the Cambodian government should exercise caution whenever it softly aligns itself with China as the country risks being trapped into Chinese sphere of influence, possibly undermining its foreign policy’s neutrality and later becoming a Chinese proxy. Cambodia should actively engage “in regional multilateral arrangements, particularly ASEAN and strengthening Cambodia’s relations with other major powers” in order to have room for maneuver.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Thayer, Carlyle A. "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest." *Asian Survey* 34, no. 6 (June 1994): 513-528.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 524-525.

⁵⁰ Chanborey, Cheunboran. "Southeast Asian Responses to Sino-US Rivalry: A Cambodian Perspective." *Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies* 05 (August 2016).

As for Vietnam, encouraging multipolar balance in sync with the major powers such as the United States, Japan, India, and Australia is critically important for the country to navigate through uncertain security threat. In addition, Vietnam should work closely with other Southeast Asian states to strengthen the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea that could possibly prevent China from taking any unilateral decisions through socializing it with these institutionalized norms. The options for Vietnam to deal with China remain limited/The country needs to push its military modernization as fast as possible if it wants to deter future Chinese aggression.

The theoretical lesson learned from this comparative study is that the primary objective of small states' foreign policy usually develops around maintaining their national security, which has been informed by the International Relations theory of "realism". Furthermore, both authoritarian and communist elites are concerned about how their foreign policy strategies help secure their regime. In the case of Cambodia, the current prime minister must

secure support from Beijing if he wishes to stay in power. If he loses the elections at some point in the future and stages a military coup to remain in power, he will require Beijing's cooperation. For Vietnam, the successful lessons from Beijing on how to open up economically and diplomatically and foster economic growth are vitally important. As Vietnam intends to move away from China, this shift may put their regime in jeopardy. The concerns over national security and regime survival of authoritarian and communist small states seem to be similar elsewhere. In order to theorize small states' foreign policy, the future study should look at other regions in Asia such as the Central Asian countries between Russia and China and the South Asian countries between India and China. The findings from these future researches are likely to contribute to the theorization of small states' foreign policy.

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